



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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SEAFOOD CUTS RISK FOR HEART DISEASE, PROLONGS LIFE AND INCREASES INFANT INTELLIGENCE, SCIENTISTS SAY

Citing a growing body of research on the relationship between seafood consumption and human health, scientists and healthcare professionals on Monday said that eating seafood reduces risk for sudden death due to heart disease – the primary killer of Americans – by up to 90 percent. Eating just a small amount of seafood per day that is high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as shrimp, canned tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish can cut the risk of death due to coronary heart disease by 20 percent.

Many of the world's leading scientists, academics and dietitians are in Washington, D.C., this week to discuss the relationship between seafood and health during a conference at the J.W. Marriott Hotel. Sponsors of the conference include NOAA and the governments of Norway, Canada and Iceland. The information linking seafood and health comes on the heels of NOAA's announcement that Americans ate a record 16.6 pounds of seafood per person in 2004.

"The scientific evidence explored today is clear and solid: eating more fish and shellfish will lead to a healthier, smarter and longer-lived U.S. population," said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service. "While there are risks associated with everything we consume, the health benefits gained from omega-3 fatty acids in fish and shellfish far outweigh the risks from contaminants for the vast majority of the population."

Scientists also pointed to research showing that omega-3 fatty acid consumption by pregnant women and infants – either through breast milk or supplemented formula – leads to higher intelligence in toddlers and young children. This finding indicates that pregnant women and nursing mothers should increase consumption of seafood that is high in omega-3 fatty acids.

Another compelling study unveiled today is the relationship between methyl mercury and selenium, an important nutrient that helps the thyroid function properly and is crucial for fetal brain development. Nicholas Ralston, a biomedical research scientist with the Energy and Environmental Research Center at the University of North Dakota, said that studies have shown selenium to neutralize mercury toxicity in the body. The few major studies that have found mercury toxicity in humans also found that the levels of mercury exposure exceeded the levels of selenium present. One such study found that the pilot whale is one of the rare marine animals that have higher levels of mercury than selenium. Commercial ocean fish are uniformly rich in selenium and therefore protect humans from any mercury toxicity.

Ralston said that selenium intake can reduce the risk of certain cancers, such as prostate cancer, by up to 50 percent. Sixteen of the top 25 sources of selenium come from ocean fish.

Scientists discussed the difficulties of communicating the important human health benefits derived from eating seafood, which often are overshadowed by news stories that focus only on

the risks. For example, a study widely publicized last year about levels of contaminants in farmed salmon failed to inform that toxin levels found in the study were 1/200 of the tolerance level established by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for safe human consumption. Also, whole fish – including the skins – were examined in the study, elevating toxins in the results even though people generally do not consume the skin.

“Unfortunately, reports focused on scares tend to dissuade people from eating fish altogether, when the benefits of seafood outweigh the risk much more often than not,” said Eric Rimm of the Harvard School of Public Health. “Consuming too much of any food can be unhealthy; balance is the key.”

Rimm said that “scare” campaigns can do a disservice to the public because they cause confusion and discourage fish consumption at a time when Americans are at historic risk for coronary heart disease. “We must educate consumers about balancing benefits and risks so that individuals and families can put the risks into perspective and make informed decisions,” he said.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends that Americans incorporate at least eight ounces of seafood, or two servings, into their diets per week. However, a new national study conducted by the Center for Food, Nutrition, and Agriculture at the University of Maryland shows that only 17 percent of Americans meet this guideline and 11 percent of Americans never eat fish.

Additional studies reported today also suggest that eating seafood:

- Reduces inflammation
- Corrects heart arrhythmia
- Prevents weight gain
- Prevents heart failure
- Prevents stroke and diabetes
- Increases the body’s healing abilities
- Increases speed of information processing and attention span in children
- Lowers blood pressure and heart rates

The conference will continue through Wednesday. Interviews with presenting scientists may be arranged by calling Susan Buchanan at 301-257-4515 or by email at susan.buchanan@noaa.gov.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

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